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Malibu's Surfrider Beach declared first-ever World Surfing Reserve

The designation is largely ceremonial, but supporters hope that enshrining the world's best surf breaks will lead to legal protections against development and pollution.

By Tony Barboza, Los Angeles Times

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Mati Waiya, left, conducts a Chumash Indian sunrise ceremony as surfers watch at Malibu's Surfrider Beach. The renowned break was designated the first-ever World Surfing Reserve. (Christina House, For The Times / October 8, 2010)

After scouring the globe in search of the perfect wave, a nonprofit organization Saturday declared the waves off Malibu's Surfrider Beach the first-ever World Surfing Reserve — a distinction meant to celebrate surf breaks not only for their size and shape, but also for their cultural significance.

Famous as the epicenter of California surf culture in the 1950s and '60s, Malibu topped a list of more than 125 nominees under the new program by the Save the Waves Coalition.

The designation is largely ceremonial and does not grant greater protection for the surf. But surfers and conservationists hope that enshrining the world's best breaks, an idea based loosely on UNESCO's list of World Heritage sites and a similar surfing reserve program in Australia, will one day lead to legally binding protections against development and pollution.

"These special surf spots are the Yosemite of the coast," said Dean LaTourrette, founding partner of World Surfing Reserves. "People need to understand how valuable and fragile they are."

Supporters, including the International Surfing Assn., the California Coastal Commission and the Surfrider Foundation (named after the famed beach), say formally recognizing world-class surf breaks could also help them avoid the fate of spots like Corona del Mar and Dana Point's legendary Killer Dana, where once-premier waves were diminished by construction.

Malibu was chosen from a list of hundreds submitted by surfing federations worldwide. The nominees went through two rounds of evaluations by a panel of surfers, scientists and activists who scored each on quality and consistency of the waves, environmental characteristics, the local attitude toward surfing and the site's place in surf culture and history.

Surfrider Beach prevailed because of its renown as a surfing destination, its legendary waves and the ongoing threat of water pollution from Malibu Creek and Malibu Lagoon.

"A place like Malibu is perfect because it's the birthplace of modern surfing, it's an amazing natural setting and yet there are serious environmental issues threatening it," said Josh Berry, environmental director for the Save the Waves Coalition.

Saturday's inauguration — which took place at Surfrider — featured events from dawn until dusk, including a Chumash Indian ceremony at sunrise, an early-morning paddle-out and appearances by prominent surfers such as Dorian "Doc" Paskowitz, Allen Sarlo and Malibu Mayor Jefferson "Zuma Jay" Wagner.

The nominees included six famous California surf breaks, among them Mavericks in Half Moon Bay and Trestles in San Onofre. Others spanned the globe from South Africa and Peru to Portugal and Indonesia.

Organizers intend to add one or two locations to the list every year. Next up for consideration could be Manly Beach in Sydney, Australia, and Waikiki in Honolulu.

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